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To cite this article: Karen Van Dyck & Souleymane Bachir Diagne (07 Feb 2024): In conversation. Karen Van Dyck speaks with Souleymane Bachir Diagne: mutuality and unexpected collaboration in translation, *The Translator*, DOI: [10.1080/13556509.2023.2275806](https://doi.org/10.1080/13556509.2023.2275806)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13556509.2023.2275806>



Published online: 07 Feb 2024.



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In conversation. Karen Van Dyck speaks with Souleymane Bachir Diagne: mutuality and unexpected collaboration in translation

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ARTICLE HISTORY Received 31 July 2023; Accepted 23 October 2023

KEYWORDS Translation; mutuality; translanguaging; migration; colonialism

The following conversation took place over Zoom on 10 March 2022 and was chaired by Chantal Wright and Kathryn Batchelor. Audience members were asked to read Karen Van Dyck's (2021) 'Migration, Translingualism, Translation' and Souleymane Bachir Diagne's (2018) 'Cultural Mediation, Colonialism and Politics: Colonial Truchement, Postcolonial Translator' in preparation for the conversation. Both pieces point towards the need for a kind of translator and interpreter who is able to read context, who can look beyond the immediate text and situation to assess what is at stake, and then act upon their reading and their interpretation, exhibiting agency. In the case of Oumar Sy, the interpreter presented in Diagne's chapter, this agency manifests as a very powerful interventionist one, exerted in a colonial context of life and death. In the case of the two later 20th-century Greek novels discussed in Van Dyck's article, it is a desired agency, an agency to move towards, a call for a more creative and ethical approach to translating translanguaging in literary texts, for which Van Dyck models a way forward. Both authors offer a vision of translation and interpreting as an opportunity to rebalance a power dynamic. The transcript of the Zoom conversation has been edited and extended.

Chantal Wright: Bachir, could you tell us about 'Cultural Mediation, Colonialism and Politics: Colonial Truchement, Postcolonial Translator' and how it fits into your work to date? It's a piece about translation written by a philosopher, and perhaps a new departure?

Souleymane Bachir Diagne: I am interested in the philosophy and ethics of translation. I co-teach a seminar on the philosophy of translation, so I look at the classics: Schleiermacher, Benjamin, etc. I am particularly interested in reciprocity. There are of course other approaches to translation: if you consider the sociology or politics of translation, for example, you might see translation as fundamentally about domination and violence. This is the subtitle of Pascale Casanova's (2015) book, *La Langue mondiale : Traduction et domination [The World Language: Translation and Domination]*. On the one

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hand, this is absolutely true: translation goes with domination. But on the other hand, if you look at the very gesture of translation, if you bracket out the political and sociological context of translation and you ask what it means to translate, using a kind of phenomenological approach; if you ask what the translator does when she gives hospitality in her language to what has been thought and created in another language, then you see translation as reciprocity, hospitality, putting in touch. This last phrase is one that I use often, drawing from Berman's (1984) *L'épreuve de l'étranger* (*The Experience of the Foreign*).

In 'Cultural Mediation, Colonialism and Politics: Colonial Truchement, Postcolonial Translator', I wanted to test the idea of translation as reciprocity within a space which is the space of domination and power *par excellence*, the colonial space. Colonialism is also the violence of translation: you are translating the identity, in a way, of the indigenous people into your own language, your own imperial language. This is the most naked form of imperialism, the imperialism of the imperial language. But even within the colonial context, the act of translation was effectuated by colonial subjects who were supposed to be simple intermediaries for colonialism, but who became true mediators. This opposition between intermediaries and mediators is taken from Bruno Latour (2005). The translators were supposed to be intermediaries, or tools for the colonial administration; they were supposed to be simple *truchement*. I'm particularly interested in this wonderful French word *truchement* because it is not French, but originally Arabic. It went through Turkish and then from Turkish to French. In Arabic, *tarjumān* is 'the translator'. At first, *truchement* had that meaning in French, and you can still use the word *truchement* to mean 'translator', but you would be speaking a very sophisticated French if you did so. Nowadays, *truchement* has come to mean 'tool'. For example, I am speaking to you, unfortunately, by the *truchement* of my laptop instead of being with you in person.

These colonial-era agents – and agency is very important here – were supposed to be *truchement* (tools) in the colonial space, but they became mediators. This suggests that even in the most asymmetrical context, translation has the virtue of creating reciprocity. In the case that I explore, reciprocity was created by those who translated their own oral literature or *orature* into the imperial language. This raises the question of what it means to translate into the imperial language: are you surrendering and paying tribute to it, accepting domination and accepting the violence of translation in a colonial context, or are you actually inhabiting it with your own language, creating an aesthetics of in-between, *une esthétique de langue à langue* [language-to-language aesthetics], as I say in my recent book (Diagne 2022)? According to this aesthetics, when you talk about 'African literature in French', you are not saying that African literature in French is not authentic; rather, this *esthétique de langue à langue* really has a meaning, and I believe in that translingual meaning, to use the concept developed by Karen. This is how this piece fits into my work on the philosophy and ethics of translation more generally.

Karen Van Dyck: Thank you, Bachir. Reading your wonderfully hopeful piece, I felt an immediate sense of recognition: there are strong resonances between your concept of mutuality in the Francophone context and mine of unexpected collaboration in the Grecophone. In my piece 'Migration, Translingualism, Translation' I talk about how translation can be a form of showing respect for the source text and culture by making the translated text a place where the other can be seen and heard (Berman 1984, 1992) or of

challenging the status quo by making the translating language seem foreign (Lewis 1985, Venuti 2013), but also how it can do both at the same time. Consider how in the translanguing literature of migration, the source and target cultures often share visual and auditory patterns, what I call unexpected collaboration (Van Dyck, 2021, 467). Your discussion of the translanguing word *truchement* is interesting to me for this reason – it comes from the Arabic *tarjumān*, goes through the Turkish *tercüman* before becoming the French *truchement*. I should add that it also had a life in Greek as *dragoumanos*, which led to the English word *dragoman*, the official intermediary between the East and the West for the Ottoman sultan. The word means ‘translator’, but also performs all sorts of translanguing translations. Listening to you unpack this, we see not only what Casanova exposes about translation as complicitous in upholding hierarchies, but also how translation can undo them, how the master’s tools can dismantle the master’s house, to use Lorde’s (1979/2000) language. More than ever in these days of war and misunderstandings we need to think about how translation, this ‘putting in touch’ of languages you describe, works.

In my forthcoming book that ends with the piece we are discussing, I chart the different ways that people move between places and how their stories about their movements map different theories of translation. Translanguing creoles, such as Gringlish and Gralbanian, become ways of acknowledging hierarchies but also of sharing and collaborating, even if unknowingly. One of the examples I give from Sotiris Dimitriou’s (1993, 2000) novel *N’ ακούω καλά τ’ όνομά σου* (*N’ akouo kala t’ onoma sou*; *May Your Name Be Blessed*) is of two Greek women working in a field in Albania who hear the bell from a church back in Greece and remember how they used to move freely back and forth. Gralbanian, the shared sounds and words of the Greek Northern Epirot and Albanian Cham Tosk dialects, like this bell that can be heard on both sides of the border, recalls what is common between peoples even at times of great ethnic division.

One of the questions I want to ask you is how mutuality works in the particular examples you give in your piece – the story of the interpreter Oumar Sy in Mali under French colonial rule, but also the French anthology of the African oral tradition by Blaise Cendrars (1921/2002). I am particularly interested in what happens when translations are written down; what happens when mutuality is hidden at the level of the letter in the language of the narrative or poem and agency becomes harder to place, when phrases bridge languages and the process of translation doesn’t break down neatly into source and target languages. You write, ‘The [African] oral text ‘translated’ into French is also the presence, virtual of course most of the time and sometimes explicit, of the language from which it was recreated. The transcription/translation is co-presence of languages, the indigenous and the European’ (Diagne 2018, 314). By ‘recreated’ do you mean the transformative process of translation, of de- and recontextualizing the source text or do you mean something more alchemic and unconscious? How does presence become co-presence? You acknowledge ‘the dated racist and evolutionary language of Cendrars’ in his anthology, but you say that the translation at the same time ‘constitutes also an authentic praise for the original African language’ and ‘dialogue’ (Diagne 2018, 314). Can you tell us a bit more about how this ‘dialogue’ between the coloniser and the colonised happens despite deception (the first case of the interpreter), but also despite not altering

the translating language of the coloniser (the second case of the translators)? How does mutuality work in such cases?

SBD: Thank you for these questions. What I loved when I read your work is precisely the fact that you have this very literary approach: you are interested in the migration of the work and you pay attention to the words being translated. Like you, I am interested in migration – not of people, but of the work – and in how even literal translation is a wonderful way of producing the kind of displacement and aesthetic effects of which your own piece is an excellent example. To answer your question, let me take the case of Birago Diop. Diop was a Senegalese author whose work was famous for being a kind of translation, in a very broad sense of the word, of West African orality into French. Diop's (1997) *L'Os de Mor Lam* [Mor Lam's Bone] is a tale, written in French, about a very greedy person who ends up dying from greed. It's very farcical, rather like *L'Avare* [*The Miser*] by Molière. *L'Os de Mor Lam* became a play, and that play was translated and migrated into many different languages. I once saw a production staged by Peter Brook at the Théâtre des Bouffes du Nord in France. There is a particular line in the play when someone tells the greedy man that so-and-so has died, and he answers: 'God have mercy on him and let him not be in a hurry for us. Que Dieu l'accueille dans sa miséricorde. Et qu'il ne se presse pas pour nous'. And obviously everybody laughed, there was general laughter. But this particular expression is a literal translation from Wolof, and it is not funny when you say it in Wolof. The expression is a standard response: if someone tells me that somebody has passed away, I say, well, may God have mercy and let him not, you know, be in a hurry when it comes to us. We obviously want to live a little more and have more conversations about translation! So it is not funny in Wolof, but it becomes funny through translation. In this case, the strictly literal translation is thus already an aesthetic transformation; this is what is manifested by the *esthétique de langue à langue* (the aesthetics of being between languages), an example of what I call mutuality and reciprocity. The example shows how it was important for Diop to appropriate the French language and play with it, establishing himself as a translator, as a mediator. If you describe him as being under the violence of the French language, you are missing the whole point of what it means actually to translate. Of course it is true that French became the language of colonial violence in Africa, but we should not limit our view to a cynical one of translation as domination: what these agents did with the language was a work of reciprocity and mutuality and we should not ignore that.

KVD: It's clear that we are both thinking about the confrontation of orality with literacy, you more on the side of orature and me of literature. I focus on two translingual practices: transliteration and homophony. Transliteration is writing down the sounds of one dialect or language in another. In linguistic terms, it is the substitution of a letter or sign from one alphabet for a letter or sign in another alphabet, such as the substitution of the Latin \underline{S} for the Greek $\underline{\Sigma}$ (sigma). It connects through similar sound and visual patterns so that a word or phrase can be said, repeated, written down, but not necessarily understood. For Anglophones, an example would be writing 'σουβλάκι' as 'souvlaki' (Van Dyck 2021, 469). But it is also by extension a more literal practice whereby one language is impressed

on another. Homophony is imprinting one language with the sounds of another language but also shared words, phrases, idioms and dialects and is therefore a part of transliteration but also a larger category like rhyme and alliteration that occurs intralingually and interlingually (Van Dyck, 2021, 472).

The example you give of the Wolof expression in French is a kind of transliteration since words in a sentence in Wolof are treated like letters and literally placed in the same order so that they end up sounding odd, almost surreal in French. Chinua Achebe does the same thing when he uses Nigerian folk sayings in his English (Onwuemene 1999). Amos Tutuola's (1993) fantastic novel *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* is another example. The writers I discuss, Thanasis Valtinos and Sotiris Dimitriou, do the same thing, as do many Greek writers of the diaspora who write in French, English and other languages. Proverbs and folk wisdom become in their hands modernist experiments, at odds with standard French or English, foreignizing. I am thinking of Irini Spanidou's (1986) novel *God's Snake* with its bizarre turns of phrases, like the title itself, which is simply a village expression for a slug (Van Dyck 2000).

But my concern is how to translate these effects. How do translators handle this translanguaging? Oftentimes, if translations are linguistically playful, they are accused of making errors or sounding awkward or deviating from the source text. Can we teach our students to learn how to read translations, so that such translanguaging is acceptable, one possible interpretation and set of effects used by the translator to make her interpretation clear? Can we teach our reviewers to review with an eye for these effects?

This question of how to recreate translanguaging effects, what you are calling literal translation, is a broader one about what happens when you take a language and extend it into another – homophonically (aural merging), transliteratively (alphabetic merging). In the play you discuss or the stories I discuss, what makes the translanguaging viable is that there is a system. Not all language is brought over but certain aspects are reinvented. Olga Broumas (1977), for example, in her poetry, brings vowels from Greek into English, as her memorable line about her politics of transliteration explains: 'Beginning with O, the o-mega ...' Even if monolingual readers don't know where the sound comes from, the cumulative effect opens up English, alters it. And Broumas is an interesting case because she also does this 'putting in touch' of more than one language in her translations (Elytis 1998).

I understand, Bachir, with the Oumar Sy example and the play by Birago Diop, how this dialogue between the coloniser and the colonised happens, even though the translating language of the coloniser is unaltered. I see how this moving from the instrumental nature of *truchement* or the intermediary to the agency of a mediator works. But what about your other example of the anthology? I'm still trying to understand how this anthology of African oral tradition, its editing and translating, establishes this kind of a dialogue. In *The Practice of Diaspora: on literature, translation and the rise of black internationalism*, our colleague Brent Edwards (2003, 82) talks about how Cendrars' anthology 'positions les nègres as distant, primitive, isolated and above all silent – anthropological objects that never talk back'. If the anthology doesn't disturb the canon of Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Mallarmé, isn't that a problem? Brent's reading of Cendrars' anthology is that *les*

nègres are unable to talk back unless you look at how the silences in that anthology open up an internationalism. Then you see what's not being talked about in the US at that time. Is this how dialogue works in this example? By opening up the frame of comparison?

SBD: I think we need to look to the concept of *littérature mineure*, developed by Franz Kafka, and popularised further by Giles Deleuze. It's a concept on which you also draw. It allows us to think of translation as something that displaces or decentres the canon without actually displacing the domination of a language. Aimé Césaire (1978/2000) appeals to it when he is asked why he doesn't write in Creole, the implication being that writing in French doesn't really decentre or decolonise the canon. Césaire's answer – in a lecture that he gave in Geneva in the 1970s (2000) – was to point to *littérature mineure*, arguing that it is about how you inhabit a given, supposedly dominating, language, or what Casanova (2004) would call a hypercentral language as opposed to a peripheral language. By inhabiting that hypercentral language, says Césaire, you are decentring and decolonising. I agree; and what I would add is that it is both profoundly ethical and profoundly needed: this is part of my own philosophical reflection on a humanism for our time. We live in a time where ethno-nationalism and tribalism are everywhere. They are evident in wars, obviously, but they are also present in the very tribal language that we are adopting. Who would have believed that an election in France would have as a thing a phrase as absurd as *grand remplacement* [great replacement]? This is tribal language *par excellence*: only a tribe can say that 'great replacement' makes sense. If you are looking at things from the perspective of human society, in general, *le peuple humain*, as a French politician said beautifully recently, the expression *grand remplacement* doesn't make sense. And this is why translation has this ethical importance: translation is the recognition both of languages in the plural and of the plurality or pluralism of the word.

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o illustrates this double recognition well: on the one hand, he decided not to write in English anymore and to write in Gikuyu instead – the decolonising gesture *par excellence*. But on the other hand, and in parallel, Ngũgĩ declared that the language of languages – and we need that language of languages – is translation. Umberto Eco is often quoted for having said that the language of Europe is translation, but this goes much further. Ngũgĩ was thinking at the scale of the world, of the totality, and he said the language of languages in general is translation. So at the same time you have the plurality or pluralism of the word, and the languages of the world, and this horizon of universality represented by translation. How do you project the plurality of who we are towards the horizon of the humanity that we have to achieve together? Because it is together that we have to face our challenges, as one single humanity: the challenge of the pandemics, the challenge of our environment that we are destroying – all these ask us to achieve our humanity together. What does it mean to do that from the plurality of who we are and the plurality of our languages? Translation.

This is why the concept of translation is so important for me philosophically. It allows us to make a horizon of universality, a universality which is not dictated by one province of the world deciding that they are the centre – Europe, namely. When there is no longer

that overarching universal, what you have is a universality of negotiation, a universality of encounter. One model of the universality of that new universal is translation.

KVD: Yes, I'm curious about the larger implications of translation for world literature and thought. I appreciate that we have different attachments to cases and examples, you as a philosopher, me as a literary critic.

SBD: I am interested in what you have to say about the connection between orality and literacy, and in what you call Gringlish, the Grecized version of English, or Gralbanian, the shared dialects of Greece and Albania. Can you say more about that?

KVD: The encounter between orality and literacy is certainly one of the things that Francophone and Grecophone literatures of the diaspora have in common, the obsessive concern with how to move from what is being spoken and sung, lamented, to the written word and the power imbalances between illiteracy and literacy. The Greek novels I discuss are telling because they perform this movement in such different ways. In Valtinos's (1972/1990, 2021) novel, the encounter with literacy is more dramatic with its story of an immigrant who comes to America at the beginning of the 20th century only to be sent back. Though the novel displays a wonderful hybridity and has become a classic for thinking about racism and migration in Greek schools, most recently with regard to the influx of Albanians, at the level of the story itself, it is all about the indecipherable new alphabet and failed migration. At one point, Kordopatis's jail cell even has a combination lock that requires knowing his American abc's. The Greek interpreter who is working for US customs finally takes the defeated Kordopatis and puts him on a boat back to Greece. 'Well, that's just the way America is!' he says. And what he means is that if you can't turn what is oral into writing, you can't stay. Again and again, the text performs this inability through the impasse of transliteration. Transliterated Gringlish words like 'Kastrigari' for 'Castle Garden', the New York entry port for immigrants, for example, carry over the sounds of the American words but not their meaning. How should English translators of these novels deal with this transliterative effect? If you just substitute 'Castle Garden' for 'Kastrigari', all the drama and difficulty of moving between languages is lost.

The existing English translation of this novel is not very successful in ways that I would like it to be. But reading it carefully turned out to be very productive. I could see how it repeatedly steered away from these issues of creole and translingualism. Even when there was a Gringlish word it was paraphrased, explained, 'cushioned', as Chantal Zabus (2007) explains in her book *The African Palimpsest*. The receiving language was standard English. This isn't necessarily a problem in itself. Standardisation or domestication is unavoidable in translation and especially for the first translation of a work can be a good choice (Venuti 2018). Translators have different interpretations and create different effects, some more domesticating, others more foreignizing. But for ethical and political reasons I wanted to figure out how to recreate the translingualism, to perform the misunderstandings instead of erasing them. The confrontation between orality and literacy in this novel, for me, was a part of a larger argument about immigrant survival, diasporic survival. You have to use

all your senses all the time, or you're sent back. In order to survive you must listen, look, touch, taste, smell. This multisensory, even synaesthetic, aspect of migrant literature has important lessons for translators. How do the sound and the look of the text work together homophonically and transliteratively? How can we produce such effects in our translations?

After showing how the novels are themselves translational, structured by and illustrative of translation, and then pointing out the problems in the existing English translations, their ethnocentrism, if you will, but also their instrumentalist idea that they can reproduce the source text in an unmediated fashion, I use the translingual poetics in these novels to show how we might selectively borrow translingual techniques to release compelling effects in the translating language and culture, how we might recontextualize the foreign accent, code-switching, and hybrid idioms of the migrant as poetry, the stuff of literature, instead of failed attempts at fluency (Van Dyck, 2021, 481).

The examples I've been giving of how source and target cultures share auditory and visual patterns help show what I mean by unexpected collaboration and how it can benefit from being thought alongside your idea of mutuality. I see that for a philosopher, the in-between is more of a concept than a strategy. But I'm curious about the decision to place this piece of yours on translation in a collection about the political economy of everyday life in Africa. Can you tell us how you approach these issues not only as a philosopher, but as someone in African Studies? What does your focus on Islam enable?

SBD: I was taught the history of philosophy as a quintessentially European history. Philosophy was born in Greece, out of a miracle; a miracle is very convenient because there is nothing before a miracle. From Greece it went to European antiquity, European medieval times, Latin medieval times, European times etc. But this history is simply not true. It was fabricated, and it was fabricated very late; it was not always the case that Europe thought of itself as the location of philosophy and therefore of universality. French philosopher Droit (2008) blames this fabrication on the three 'h's, as he calls them: Hegel, Husserl and Heidegger.

Rather than being European, philosophy has existed everywhere in all societies and all cultures; it is quintessentially something human to ask yourself a certain number of philosophical questions. But even if we take the case of the Greek heritage, and use the medieval phrase *translatio studii* or *translatio studiorum* to talk about the transmission and translation of Greek philosophy, it is still a fabrication to say that Greek thought was transmitted directly to Europe: *translatio studiorum* went through other places too. In addition to the trajectory that goes from Athens to Rome, and from Rome to Heidelberg, or London or Paris, you also have the trajectory that goes from Athens to Nishapur, to Baghdad, to Cordoba, to Fez, and to Timbuktu in Mali at the heart of Africa. This is where Amadou Hampâté Bâ is from, and where his own master, Tierno Bokar Saalif Tall, whose story I'm also telling in this piece, is from. So this is the connection: I am interested in the way in which philosophy has travelled, or in other words in the voyage of philosophy in many different languages. My argument is that you have to pluralise the geographies of philosophy, the history of philosophy, and the languages of philosophy. This is what connects my reflections on Islamic philosophy and African philosophy and philosophy in general, because Islamic philosophy is

the product of translation. As Greek philosophy was received in the Islamic world, it was translated not only into the Arabic language, but also into the very concepts and representations of what I would call the imaginary of the Islamic world. Certain Islamic narratives, for example, found translation in the language of Greek Neo-Platonism. To have a clear picture of the history of philosophy, you have to bring together all these histories of philosophy; to understand medieval philosophy, you have to look at the braid of history coming from Islamic philosophy and Jewish philosophy, and from the Greek side you have to consider the Byzantine Christian tradition rather than only Latin Christianity. It is all about pluralising; that is what the connection is.

KVD: And would you say that pluralising philosophy is also a way of pluralising translation and making these various acts of translanguaging and translation visible? By showcasing the activity of the the tarjuman, the dragoman, the translator as mediator, and by bringing these different stories into contact, 'langue à langue', are you and I pluralising? By describing them and figuring out what works and doesn't work, are we pluralising? When you say Cendrars' anthology is a bad translation, sloppily put together, I think it is important to explain why it is sloppy and to demand new translations that better reflect the interpretations we care about. I am reminded of the famous Benjamin (1992) essay 'The Translator's Task' because it talks about the loving detail that goes into matching up languages. But, again, perhaps this focus on the details is more the job of a literary critic than a philosopher. Somebody who writes about and translates literature must spend time on that, whereas someone who is a philosopher is actually having to make a larger universal claim. It's a very different travail!

SBD: It is indeed. The claim I'm making as a philosopher is that we can turn translation into a humanism. That would be one way of summarising what I am trying to do. I once translated into English a mystical Sufi poem by a Senegalese Sufi sheikh who wrote in Wolof, and this was quite an experience. Now, whenever I talk about translation, I have in mind this very particular experience of sweating over the mystical language in Wolof and turning it into as much mystical English as I could. This is a totally different way of relating to the language and the richness of the language.

I have learned a lot from the French poet Blaise Cendrars, the editor of the *Anthologie nègre*. In his preface – which is very short – Cendrars asked readers to look at the tales, as transcribed and translated into French, and to try to imagine from the translation what the original must have been. He asked them to try to imagine the beauty of the languages that the tales come from and the imaginary that produced them in the first place. This was quite a fantastic gesture to make: it says that what we have is a translation, and we will never have the original text, because the original texts come from orality, and orality is performance, and the performance is done once and for all, and it is over. What you have now is translation without an original. Cendrars' idea that you can reconstitute the beauty of the original from the translation goes right to the ethical aspect of things and serves as a counternarrative to the language of domination. Rather than seeing the translation of oral literature into French as a surrender or tribute to the imperial language, Cendrars sees translation as indicating the nobility of one's own language in the first place. This is

different from the view that you are elevating your own orality by putting it into a more hypercentral language; it is different from the view that to be translated into French is ontological gain.

To return to your earlier question, this also connects with Islam. In the case of orality or literature written about Islam in indigenous languages vis-à-vis Arabic, Arabic presents itself as the hypercentral language and is dismissive of any language that is not Arabic. The Wolof West African Sufi poet Moussa Ka disagrees: for him, there is no particular nobility of the Arabic language vis-à-vis my own language. Yes, Arabic is the language of the Koran, but it is not the language of Islam. Any single human language has value as a language of Islam, if you want to go in that direction. Translation creates reciprocity and mutuality where you have domination or any kind of ethnocentrism or linguistic nationalism. Translation – the work of translation, in the task of the translator – decentres and corrodes that linguistic nationalism.

KVD: Sometimes what is important is not turning orature into literature but pointing out why it can't be done. By putting your comments about the translations in Cendrars' anthology in the context of your appreciation of his own poems, I better understand your appreciation of the anthology. My point would be that what the translator's preface says matters, but also that there is often a disjunction between the preface, as a record of the translator's intention, and the actual translation, where the intention is realised or incorporated. There's the intention and then there's the action, and the relation between them can't be reduced to simple resemblance or causality. We must talk about what we do when we translate. We need to hear why you sweat, what happened when you were doing that translation you did. We have to talk about what your goal was, what you wanted to have happen, but also what happened and of course the reception of your translation.

Would you say that you are asking all of us, translators, to be mediators, in that kind of worlding way, to open up our contexts of interpretation, the frames, so that we understand the ethical implications of the jokes and tricks we play? Acknowledging mediation means acknowledging that translations like source texts have numerous overlapping frames of interpretation. Could you say something more about how your universality connects to your idea of multilateralism?

SBD: The notion of lateral universality is at the centre of my work. We live in a decolonised world. It is postcolonial: 1955 has happened; the Bandung conference has taken place. This is where African countries and states, and Asian countries, the colonised world, so to say, came together, in the absence of Europe, and condemned colonialism, and said: Here we are, and our presence here means the irruption of the plural on the stage of history. Universal history is not history happening only in Europe. The stage of history is the world at large, and here we are also with our languages, our cultures, all of them, equivalent to any other language and any other culture – hence the plural. No culture or civilisation or so-called civilisation has the privilege of being the vertical culture that is supposed to shine upon the rest of humanity and indicate what universality is and ask the rest to follow their lead.

After Bandung, you could say: Okay, we get rid of any idea of universality anyway. But that is not the direction I take. That would just lead us to a juxtaposition of experiences, or so-called experiences, and they would not communicate. In our time, which is obsessed by identities, you would say that my experience as a 180-centimetre-tall black man is not yours, if you do not share that identity, and so on, and so forth. The world would just be a juxtaposition of experiences that cannot be translated into one another. But I believe in translation: translation is this impossible task which ends up being realised.

The best image of what French philosopher Merleau-Ponty has called lateral or horizontal universality is this image of languages all situated on the same plane of immanence and talking to each other through translation. There is no vertical universality, with someone from above telling us what universality is. Instead, universality is something that is negotiated and encountered. In diplomatic terms, at the UN, they call it multilateralism, which means (in theory at least) all nations coming together in one single place and negotiating a universal declaration of human rights, or expanding on rights, or coming together to tackle the environmental challenge that we are all facing. The Conferences of the Parties (COPs) are probably the best representation today of this lateral universality. We need this horizon of universality because we are challenged as one single humanity by the fact that we are destroying our planet. At the same time, we come from different languages, including those of the south, where people are contributing very little to the destruction of the planet, or to CO₂ gases, but are disproportionately suffering from it. In Africa, for example, the desert is progressing 10 centimetres per hour. This is a very concrete example of what it means to think in terms of multi-lateral universality. It is not about abandoning any idea of universality, because I don't want to live in a world where you have only juxtaposed identities and everybody performs their own identity and then leaves the stage. I do believe that if we are human, then any single experience is translatable into the language of other experiences as well. This is why my book starts with the translation of that wonderful poem read by Amanda Gorman, *The Hill We Climb*. I insist, against those who questioned the choice of a Dutch white woman poet as Gorman's translator, that one does not need to share the identity of the author (being a black slamming woman) to be the most able to translate her work.

KVD: Right: some people say you have to be a certain identity in order to translate a certain identity, as if I can't translate Euripides's *Medea* because I'm not a 5th B.C.E. male tragedian.

SBD: Identity politics is opposed to the idea of translation.

KVD: Yes, that's what I'm hearing from you. In the midst of this war between Russia and Ukraine, the enforced official languages and fixed identities, you are asking for something radically different with the idea of multilateralism.

SBD: I think so. I'm optimistic but not naïve. Again, I acknowledge the domination. The political sociological approach to translation taken by Gisèle Sapiro and Pascale Casanova is totally valid, but at the same time the answer to the domination of languages by other languages is translation. Ngũgĩ is right, the language of languages is translation and we have to hold that, firmly, that humanist optimist message. We are not ignoring

domination or inequalities, but these things don't mean that translation is to be dismissed. On the contrary, they mean that you need more translation, because translation is the answer to domination.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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